

Shakespeare: assassin?

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Cedric Watts:

Shakespeare: Assassin?

Here's a puzzle. Teachers and critics tend to give the impression that Shakespeare's influence has been a benign one, imparting so much humane eloquence to the world; but if they want Shakespeare to be life-enhancing, then, logically, they must surely also concede that he can be lethal. Yet repeatedly they flinch from making that concession. The fact remains that Shakespeare is implicated in at least one assassination, and even in mass slaughter. Let's face it: if we consider just two plays, *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*, we soon see that his influence has been destructive.

1

After the assassination of Julius Caesar, Cassius says:

How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted o'er,
In states unborn and accents yet unknown?

The answer to his question is, 'An ever-increasing number of ages, including the Victorian age and the modern age; and the "states unborn" will include the United States of America and South Africa. Furthermore, your "lofty scene" will be re-enacted not only on stage, as your imagery suggests, but also in reality, as you simultaneously imply: real blood will flow.'

John Wilkes Booth, a famed and successful actor, assassinated President Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington D.C. on 14 April, 1865. His father was Junius Brutus Booth, an eminent British actor whose two first names derived from the Brutus commemorated in *Julius Caesar*. The assassin's forename 'Wilkes' honours John Wilkes, the British radical journalist and politician who had supported the American rebels during the American War of Independence. John Wilkes Booth was a confederate sympathiser who opposed the abolition of slavery and regarded Lincoln as a tyrant.

According to one eye-witness, J. W. Booth, having shot Lincoln in the head, leapt down from the President's box to the stage, and shouted '*Sic semper tyrannis!*' (Latin for 'Thus always to tyrants!') before fleeing. Booth himself claimed that he shouted '*Sic semper!*' before firing his pistol at the President. That Latin exclamation, '*Sic semper tyrannis!*', had been

attributed to the historic Brutus at Caesar's assassination; it became the motto of the Commonwealth of Virginia. It abbreviates '*Sic semper evellō mortem tyrannīs*': loosely, 'Thus I always extort the death of tyrants'.

Booth had played the parts of Shakespeare's Brutus and Mark Antony, and he said that his favourite character was Brutus. He accused Lincoln of 'making himself a king', the very accusation made against Caesar by his assassins in the play. Shortly before being ambushed and shot by the forces of law and order, Booth wrote in his diary: 'With every man's hand against me, I am here in despair. And why[?] For doing what Brutus was honored for, what made Tell a hero. And yet I for striking down a greater tyrant than they ever knew am looked upon as a common cutthroat.'

Thus Shakespeare's Brutus, perceived as a foe of tyranny, helped to prompt the assassination of an American President. Certainly Booth had in mind the actual historical slaying of Caesar, but clearly his participation in the play entitled *Julius Caesar*, which resulted in his admiration for the fictional Brutus, had also contributed to his motivation. He evidently was not deterred by the fact that, in reality and in the play, the assassins of Caesar were eventually defeated: their attempt to avert dictatorship proved counter-productive.

On 19 April 1995, a terrorist bomb-attack in Oklahoma City killed 168 people and destroyed many buildings. Timothy McVeigh, who would be sentenced to death for his leading role in the attack, was arrested on the same day as the atrocity. He was wearing a tee-shirt bearing that ominous phrase, '*sic semper tyrannīs*' and a picture of Lincoln. Evidently, therefore, he was prompted by J. W. Booth, the son of J. Brutus Booth. Thus violence generates violence. Roman Brutus had a long legacy.

Let us suppose that we were able to confront the shade of William Shakespeare with this evidence. Shakespeare's shade might respond: 'If you blame me for helping to prompt Booth's ruthless act of murder, then give me credit for encouraging the magnanimous Nelson Mandela, champion of reconciliation.'

As a young man, Nelson Mandela worked to establish the Youth League of the African National Congress. The League's manifesto ended with an exhortation to action: Cassius's words, 'The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings.' Mandela later remarked, 'Somehow, Shakespeare always seems to have something to say to us.'

When Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island, the prisoners passed round 'the Robben Island Bible'. This was the Peter Alexander

edition of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*, smuggled in, its covers disguised with Hindu images. Mandela selected as his favourite passage some lines from *Julius Caesar*. He marked them with vertical strokes in the margin and the dated signature 'N. R. D. Mandela 16.12.77' alongside it. The passage, which he evidently found sustaining, was this:

Cowards die many times before their deaths:
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come. [2.2.32-7: Alexander text.]

Thus the proud words that Shakespeare attributed to Julius Caesar helped to sustain Nelson Mandela, who, after serving 27 years in jail for 'conspiracy to overthrow the state', emerged to become President of South Africa (1994-99) and a greatly admired statesman. Mandela, who advocated the reconciliation of former foes, would have known that Caesar had sometimes forgiven and even promoted his former enemies: among them, ironically, Brutus and Cassius. 16 December, the day and month of Mandela's inscription in that Peter Alexander edition of Shakespeare, would become South Africa's Reconciliation Day.

2

Historically, Shakespeare's treatment of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* has featured in anti-Semitic propaganda. In 1832, a Tasmanian newspaper denounced Jewish immigrants as 'Shylocks'; and in 1882 a writer in the *New York Times* warned its readers not to sympathise with victims of Russian pogroms, for these people showed that 'Shylock was not the mere creation of a poet's fancy'. In 1920, E. S. Spencer published *Democracy or Shylocracy?*, supposedly 'a graphic exposure of Jew corruption in Finance, Politics and Society'.

In Nazi Germany, the play was frequently staged: there were thirty productions between 1934 and 1939, for example. In Vienna, in May 1943, *The Merchant of Venice* was performed by command of the Nazi Gauleiter, Baldur von Schirach, who had publicly declared that

every Jew active in Europe is a danger to European culture. If people want to criticise me for deporting tens of thousands of Jews from this city...I can only answer that I see it as a positive contribution to European culture.

Defenders of Shakespeare may say this: ‘Shakespeare is not to be blamed for the bad ways in which some people (J. W. Booth and the Nazis, for instance) have chosen to be influenced by his works.’ But then the logical corollary is surely this: ‘Shakespeare is not to be praised for the *good* ways in which some people (Nelson Mandela, for instance) have chosen to be influenced by his works.’ You can’t have one without the other.

3

It is customary to praise Shakespeare as a truth-teller: as one who give true insights into human nature. Does it not follow, then, that he should be condemned for blackening the character of Richard in *Richard III* and for whitewashing the character of Henry in *Henry VIII* (also known, absurdly, as *All Is True*)?

Sir Philip Sidney appears to offer an escape-route from this dilemma. He says (in the *Defence of Poesie*, 1595), ‘Now for the *Poet*, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth.’ The poet, or playwright, cannot be termed a liar, because we know he is always dealing in fiction: everything he says is in quotation-marks, so to speak. Alas, this argument rebounds. If he never affirms, and thus never lies, it follows that he never tells truths either. Sidney saves the poet only by neutering him. Such salvation is not worth having: we lose far more than we gain.

Liberal teachers naturally like to suggest that great works of literature impart liberal values. They should recall Peter Green (in *Final Exam: A Novel*, 2013), who argued that some fans of literature may, rather like some football fans, undergo moral and emotional *depletion*. The football fans appreciate on-screen speed and agility while they themselves, sprawling on sofas and swigging beer, become slower and fatter. Green adds: ‘Look at the lives of teachers of Eng. Lit.: not, on the whole, an inspiring prospect.’

When Shakespeare says things we like, we praise Shakespeare for them. When he says things we don’t like, we tend to find umpteen excuses: we blame his times, or his sources, or his collaborators, or his interpreters. (Kenneth Tynan once remarked that *Titus Andronicus* was the worst play that Marlowe ever wrote.) This won’t do. We need to accept that Shakespeare’s influence is multifarious and, although it has so often been good, it has sometimes been conspicuously bad. *His words can kill*.

Professor Cedric Watts edits the Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare series, and is author of *Shakespeare Puzzles* (Amazon Lulu, 2014) and *Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar': A Critical Discussion* (Amazon Lulu, 2015).
